

# The Dispensable Migrants: A Study of Representation of Illegal Migration in Indian Cinema

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## **Abstract**

The Indian diaspora has become the new epitome of Indianness due to its positive representation in media, especially Bollywood films. Bollywood, for decades, has been presenting the issues of Indian migrants to the West. The focus, however, has been on the problems faced by these ‘lawful’ migrants and their struggle to cope with the changes in their physical and mental space. Conversely, unlawful migrants have rarely been discussed in mainstream Hindi cinema. Thus, this article deals with this under-representation of illegal migration in commercial Bollywood films. We then analyse certain non-commercial movies like *Umrika* and *Surkhaab*, which have tried to find a space for an analytical discussion on illegal migrants, who are very much a part of diasporic reality, but who have been conveniently ignored by commercial Hindi cinema. The absence of such representation makes this reality a missing piece of the diaspora and border studies puzzle. We identify certain factors which can be used to assess the illegal migrant experience in both commercial and non-commercial Hindi cinema.

**Keywords:** illegal migration, Bollywood, independent Indian cinema, representation, diaspora

## **Introduction**

Legal, that is the word that saves.

Roberto Quesada, *Never through Miami* (2003)

Stories are reminiscent of conflicts. Cinema carries within it the characteristics of conflicts that define individuals and the human experience. The stories of South Asian migration—“cultural production, circulation, and reception”<sup>1</sup>—are essential to diaspora representation. The Indian film industry engages with depictions of conflicts, which are much more than a “second-order mirror,”<sup>2</sup> and are often used for a “twofold purpose—to garner an audience and to explore the realms of the art of films. They are our representatives, and where we can’t be, they can be.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Theorizing Diaspora*, eds Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (London: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003), pp. 233–246.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, “Representation and the Medial,” *Youtube*, 30 November (2021). At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84depWskwu0>.

Commercial and independent cinema often intermix their cultural statuses based on these factors. The idea of the journey, both symbolic and physical, covers the arc of the protagonists. In the Indian context, Partition, Colonisation, economic and financial distress, poverty, family connections, and peer groups often feature as reasons for the domestic and international migration of Indians. While many voluntary migrations occur in search of better livelihoods to the West, the desperation to leave a crisis-prone homeland also leads to the illegal migration process. “Cross-national movements of people, for long-term settlement or triggered by circumstances have been a critical element in India’s national experience. India has been the destination of adventurous outsiders and the farewell dock for enterprising emigrants.”<sup>4</sup> The film industry saw an intermixing of cultures that arose from the influx of regional migrations, the representation of which was seen as a “temple of desire”<sup>5</sup> for the diaspora. Not only were the film studios all over India telling stories of regional and domestic migrants, but they were also changing due to this migration. Film studios in Bombay got technicians from Lahore. Calcutta boasted films and stories that were inspired by experiences of partition. The films of the 1940s-1980s span the representation of the experience of migration, depicting the plight of working-class migrants who traveled domestically.

Bollywood—“unquestionably nationally dominant”<sup>6</sup> cinema—has enjoyed a hegemonic position as the dominant film industry in India and internationally. Bollywood filmmakers have typecast the diaspora by commodifying different experiences, which are regarded as cultural markers by the audience. “Because Bollywood is identified as a commercial or conventional cinema, critics tend to immediately associate it with ‘Western conventions,’ such as concealing its production marks. Simultaneously, the Bollywood film is labeled ‘doubly degraded,’ as it is seen not only as mere entertainment but also as a form derived from and imitative of its Western counterpart.”<sup>7</sup> The understanding of commercial Hindi cinema then can be found in this dichotomy. One aspect of these stories is also the narration of the experience of illegal migration.

Migration that “occurs outside of the legal–institutional frameworks established by states”<sup>8</sup> is termed illegal; people holding this status are not authorised to be in the country, and their existence is precarious. Historically, their presence has contributed to the host countries they have been a part of. Yet, they have been disregarded. For instance, Punjabi migrants in the United States were always despised by white men for taking away their jobs, even though they were responsible for improving agricultural practices and making California a fertile land.<sup>9</sup> Despite the vast numbers of illegal immigrants, they are brushed aside and spurned. Indians trying to cross borders and

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<sup>4</sup> Partha S. Ghosh, “To and From India, with Love,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2012), pp. 54–66.

<sup>5</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti (eds), *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ajay Gehlawat, *Reframing Bollywood: Theories of Popular Hindi Cinema* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Baldwin Edwards, “Towards a Theory of Illegal Migration: Historical and Structural Components,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 7 (2008), pp. 1449–1459.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Gottlieb, “Punjabi Sikh-Mexican American Community Fading into History,” *The Washington Post*, 13 August (2012). At: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/punjabi-sikh-mexican-american-community-fading-into-history/2012/08/13/cc6b7b98-e26b-11e1-98e7-89d659f9c106\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/punjabi-sikh-mexican-american-community-fading-into-history/2012/08/13/cc6b7b98-e26b-11e1-98e7-89d659f9c106_story.html).

getting into United States soil illegally have increased in the last few years. According to the Customs and Border Protection Agency in an *Economics Times* article, in 2019-2020, the number of illegal immigrants apprehended on the US border was 19,883. While this number rose to 30,662 in 2020-2021 and had a soaring 109% rise to 63,927 in the 2021-2022 fiscal year. The statistics record a 43% hike since 2009 with Ananya Bhattacharya writing that “last year, 14,000 Indians on tourist or business visas overstayed their legally-permitted welcome. It beats all other Asian nations when it comes to illegal entrants, according to a recent Pew Research Report.”<sup>10</sup>

Illegal migration is considered a massive problem for the nations, and all the policy-makers have focused on deploying policies and rules to control the situation. Whatever scholarship in academia and otherwise exists, it has dramatically focused on the policies regarding the construction of this inclusive and exclusive divide in migration. Although studies have been done on historical perspectives on the emergence of the term illegal migration, there have been fewer studies on their representation in cinema. This article, without critically looking at the status of people in terms of legality, takes a step forward to examine the representation of such migrants in Hindi cinema. It examines the representation of migration from India to the world in Bollywood and certain independent films. The article analyses two independent Indian films—*Umrika* (2015) and *Surkhaab* (2015)—and the central theme of illegal migration as depicted in them.

The production of films is often entangled in aesthetics and the market. Embroiled within this dichotomy are the concerns of the filmmaker and their audience. Independent cinema is categorised by its niche thematic studies of issue-based stories and provides an alternative mode of storytelling. Independent cinema differentiates itself from commercial cinema by stating that its primary concern is not to make a blockbuster but to produce an aesthetically stylised and beautiful film. Funding takes center stage for these alternative films not backed by big production houses. There is considerable politics responsible for the topics and themes that commercial cinema and independent cinema cover. Although they exhibit different concerns about their production, it is not to say that they lie in complete opposition to each other. As Ashwin Immanuel Devsundaram writes, “Indie films that are now a normalised feature of India’s annual cinematic output.”<sup>11</sup>

Speaking about the production of independent films in India since 2010 onwards, Devsundaram assesses that the lines between commercial Bollywood cinema and alternative independent cinema have been blurred in content and marketing. Different meanings are attributed to the terms parallel, independent, and alternative. This means that even though these films can be clubbed into the form of Indian cinema, which is not mainstream, they cannot be generalised under one uniform term. “What really distinguishes the New Indian Cinema is a definitive set of liberal-

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<sup>10</sup> Ananya Bhattacharya, “Indians Are the Fastest-Growing Illegal Immigrant Population in the US,” *Quartz*, 23 September (2016). At: <https://qz.com/india/789754/indians-are-the-fastest-growing-illegal-immigrant-population-in-the-us>.

<sup>11</sup> Ashwin Immanuel Devasundaram, “Introduction: New Independent Indian Cinema: Disciplinary Evolution and Cinematic Revolution,” in Ashwin Immanuel Devasundaram (ed.), *The New Independent Cinema Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

humanitarian values, embracing progressive solutions to urgent problems, a sensitivity to the plight of the poor and oppressed, a faith in the ultimate movement of man toward change.”<sup>12</sup>

Where commercial cinema creates productions for the masses, it also becomes the tool to develop typecasted images of essential institutions of society: “It ceased to be a critique of the system and instead moved into being an adopter.”<sup>13</sup> Specifically, the nation is often revered, and the diasporic experiences in the films of the 2000s post-globalisation are taken as aspirational positive experiences. Ultimately, the glorifying glamour of the privileged is often showcased as a diasporic experience in Bollywood, also seen as the “temple of modern India.”<sup>14</sup> Undercutting such depictions is the space provided by independent cinema. It shows a side of the human experience without worrying about glamorising it to be sold well. The form of Independent Cinema thus allows space for the representation of stories that today struggle to reach the masses via Bollywood. “This is precisely where the Indies’ provision of a cinematic space to articulate alternative, secondary and tertiary narratives that challenge the status quo and ruling power becomes paramount... filmmakers can use independent cinema to combat the combined repressive forces of socio-cultural orthodoxy and politico-religious dogmatism.”<sup>15</sup>

In stories of illegal migration, the two films taken for analysis—*Surkhaab* and *Umrika*—tell stories of protagonists from the ‘subaltern’ section of the class structure. Their stories find space in independent films, focusing solely on the protagonists' journeys as illegal migrants. At the same time, commercial Bollywood films like *Street Dancer 3D* (2020) and *Aa Ab Laut Chale* (1999) are only a few examples that provide glimpses of the issue of illegal migration. Yet, they fall short of focusing on the legal aspect of the story. Instead, the commercial film's formula focuses on the dramatised and exaggerated pathos of the suffering of the privileged protagonists. While *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* exhibits romance brewing up in a foreign location, *Street Dancer 3D* retains its focus on prosperous young kids and their passion for dance. The sufferings are not attributed to their social status of being illegal migrants. Instead, they exhibit more universal aspects of struggle like relationships, work, and the American Dream. Ellen M. Brennan states:

An "illegal migrant" may be a person who crosses a land border between ports of entry to seek employment in another country; a worker who is recruited by an unauthorized agency to work, for example, in a Middle Eastern country; a migrant worker in any number of countries who changes his job and fails to report the fact to the authorities; a tourist or student who decides to remain in a country and seek employment; a relative who joins a foreign worker without going through formal family reunion channels; or a worker who,

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<sup>12</sup> Ragnathan Raina, “The New Generation 1960-1980,” *Film India* (New Delhi: Directorate of Film Festivals, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Susmita Dasgupta, “The Hindi Commercial Cinema in the Days of Globalisation,” in *Sociology of Globalisation: Perspectives from India*, ed. Sakarama Somayaji and Ganesh Somayaji (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2006), p. 254.

<sup>14</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta, “The Painted Face of Politics: The Actor- Politicians of South Asia,” in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), pp. 127–147.

<sup>15</sup> Devasundaram, “Introduction: New Independent Indian Cinema,” p. 2.

typically in a Middle Eastern context, changes his sponsor or breaks his contract without authorization; he may even be a rejected asylum-seeker who is declared to be an economic migrant.<sup>16</sup>

Immigration laws have been biased against Asian-origin immigrants for a very long time. Such situations led to upheaval across the globe due to the rise of unauthorised border crossings. Hence, it is then imperative to understand illegal migrants as a “historically contingent”<sup>17</sup> category that has been created by the changing policies of changing times. Katherine M. Donato and Douglas S. Massey point out this “Faustian bargain” under which “immigration must be restricted because labor and human capital are attached to people and people have agency.”<sup>18</sup> These ‘guest workers’ were not a problem until they were workers. But when these people tried to exercise their agency and claim a right in the host country, they were to be flogged. Swiss playwright Max Frisch’s remark, “we asked for workers, we got people,”<sup>19</sup> aptly sums up the problematic status ascribed to these people. They were never expected to have any sort of legitimate claim or agency.

The illegality of migration is a fluid category, not a fixed one. There are many incongruities in the case of these migrations; there is a lot of politics involved as well. Also, the whole legality is based on differentiation and exclusion, which has long been debated among bureaucrats and intellectuals. It cannot be ignored that “the construction of migrant illegality is related to increasing state intervention, lawmaking, and border control. It is also related to increasing inequality between citizens and non-citizens and more strict immigration regulations protecting access to residence and citizenship.”<sup>20</sup> Despite this, such representations is lacking in commercial cinema.

Thus, in today’s times, it becomes significant to look at how this issue is addressed in Indian cinema. For this purpose, the paper looks at several factors to study the representation of illegal migration. Firstly, the main plot revolves around the issues related to illegal migration. It is the film's central theme instead of being at the periphery. Secondly, human emotions, which generally dominate the big screen, are at par with the legality of the migration. Life up to the decision to migrate is as vital as life after reaching the foreign shore. The how and why behind the displacement must be dealt with equally. Thirdly, the elements in the film used to map the experiences of migrants are not homogenised. The films do not follow the formula of a successful drama film. Lastly, the creation of a community is a common feature that appears in the discourse of migration, making it imperative to look at the communities created. Whether patriotic fervor brings people together or the perils of being an alien in a foreign land create a sense of belonging,

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<sup>16</sup> Ellen M. Brennan, “Irregular Migration: Policy Responses in Africa and Asia,” *International Migration Review*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1984), pp. 409-410.

<sup>17</sup> Stephan Scheel and Vicki Squire, “Forced Migrants as ‘Illegal’ Migrants,” *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine M. Donato and Douglas S. Massey, “Twenty-First Century Globalization and Illegal Migration,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 666, no. 1 (2016), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Max Frisch and Alistair Beaton, *The Arsonists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Corrie Van Eijl, “Tracing Back ‘Illegal Aliens’ in the Netherlands, 1850-1940,” in *Illegal Migration and Gender in a Global and Historical Perspective*, ed. Marlou Schrover, Joanne Van Der Leun, Leo Lucassen and Chris Quispel (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), pp. 39-40.

this sentiment must be examined. Scholars study commercial cinema and independent cinema in India, and how far they subscribe or deviate from these markers, to represent illegal migration.

### Migration in Commercial Hindi Cinema

Hindi cinema has witnessed characters moving between countries, which carries a symbolic meaning. Migration dominated Hindi cinema in the 1990s, which, according to Arjun Appadurai, is a “synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios.”<sup>21</sup> Before the 1990s—in films like *Do Bhiga Zameen* (1953) and *Purab aur Paschim* (1970)—the depiction of NRIs and Indian immigrants abroad had been stereotypically negative owing to the characters’ Western ideals and culture. The focus then was to highlight the difference between the Indian value system, which is put on a pedestal, eulogised, and is to be preserved from infection by corrupt Western culture. The common sentiment was echoed in anthems like *Mera Joota hai Japani...Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*.<sup>22</sup>

Films after the 1990s can be seen as “the caricature of the nostalgic NRI.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to being model minority citizens in the host country, the NRIs in these films are the epitome of Indian identity. Their behavior and attitude define what Indianness means. This category includes films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaenge (DDLJ)* and *Pardes*. Neelam Sidhar Wright calls filmmakers like Aditya Chopra and Karan Johar, the “brat-pack generation of young filmmakers”; they were the torchbearers of the NRI film canon.<sup>24</sup> The Indias of their mind seems to occupy a lot more space than the actual place they are currently residing in. As Raminder Kaur states “there has been a re-mapping of the ‘Indian’ subject ... located not just within the confines of India but also outside the nation-state where countries of actual residence appear to matter little next to the diasporic character’s ‘essential’ identity premised upon origins.”<sup>25</sup>

Not just thematically, films like *DDLJ*, *Pardes*, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (K3G)* redefined the film’s grammar, which challenged, and the disposition changed with an increased number of foreign locations, wealth, and use of the English language in these films. Notably, this also highlights the attention to class given in these films. The NRIs of these films live a comfortable life in the host countries, often quite opulent. The concerns are not to make ends meet in the new land; the promised land has delivered what it was supposed to. Their struggles are with their ideas of identity. Despite having no concerns with middle-class problems, these films presented an imaginary ideal of Indianness “that is simultaneously cosmopolitan and based on a vision of

<sup>21</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Raj Kapoor (dir.), *Awaara* (R.K Films, 1951).

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Uberoi, “The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1998), p. 328.

<sup>24</sup> Neelam Sidhar Wright, *Bollywood and Postmodernism: Popular Indian Cinema in the 21st Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Raminder Kaur, “Cruising on the Vilayeti Bandwagon: Diasporic Representations and Reception of Popular Indian Movies,” *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, eds Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (London: Sage, 2005), p. 310.

conservative middle-class values centered around the family.”<sup>26</sup> However, portraying the middle class and their problems is an integral part of independent cinema; it picks up where commercial cinema addresses issues closer to the marginalised groups of society.

According to Wright, there is a change in how Bollywood films showcase the Indian diaspora after the era of these films. She calls the contemporary Bollywood films ‘New Bollywood’, which no longer fixates on NRI and Indian diasporic heroes. The NRI characters of the 1990s and the diasporic consciousness depicted through them are in the past and no longer sit well with either India or its global audience. Films like *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *New York* (2009), and *Love Aajkal* (2009) are not paying homage to the ideal of the Indian diaspora, but rather explicate the experience of the postmodern characters. Wright states that “instead of simply aspiring towards caricaturing and capitalising on the diasporic experience, newer Bollywood films are now invested in the questioning and blurring of identity, rendering the previous separation of ‘foreigner’ and ‘desi’ problematic.”<sup>27</sup>

What is shared across all the eras and these films is the absence of and disregard for concerns around illegal migration. The four markers representing illegal migration discussed at the article’s beginning are lop-sided in these commercial films. The films discuss migration as an umbrella term under which every concern is assumed to have been included. The diaspora consciousness in all these films is predisposed to the stories of a comparatively affluent group. However, it is laudable for a commercial film like *Street Dancer* to mention issues related to illegal migration. Disappointingly, it becomes a side-issue that fails to leave an impact. The characters playing the illegal immigrants lack depth, and their life is only essential to sadden the otherwise bubbly Inayat. They are merely used as props to serve the purpose of the dance competition and to bring the Indian and Pakistani rival dance teams together. The fate of the illegal migrants relies on the dance competition at the film’s end and is partially resolved by the same dance stint. The focus is on winning the dance competition, and resolving such grave issues is shown to be as easy as winning the match. As expected from a commercial film, the dance moves and the India-Pakistan rivalry of the dance crews take center stage in the film. It blends all the elements—romance, rivalry, jealousy, drama, music—to make it a typical commercial film.

Furthermore, even the scholarship on cinema and migration has failed to highlight this gap and address this oversight. The formulaic composition of commercial cinema doesn’t allow ample space to represent such stories of illegal migration. This can be attributed to the lack of mass reach to the audience regarding this issue, as well as showcasing gaping holes in the nation’s conditions that lead to illegal migrations in the first place. This lack of representation of illegal immigrants—their lives, struggles, and concerns after migrating to a new country—has been taken up by a few Independent Indian films. A close analysis of *Umrika* and *Surkhaab* presents how these independent cinemas attempt to bridge this gap.

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<sup>26</sup> Christiane Brosius and Nicholas Yazgi, “‘Is There No Place like Home?’: Contesting Cinematographic Constructions of Indian Diasporic Experiences,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2007), p. 375.

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Bollywood and Postmodernism*, p. 28.

## Illegal Migration in *Umrika*

Premiering at the Sundance Film Festival in 2015, Prashant Nair's *Umrika* attempts to bring various facets of migration to the fore. While there is not a single scene shot in the United States the film is about the American Dream of the people of Jitvapur. Though migration is an integral part of the film, the audience is left to wonder if the protagonist ever reaches his destination, whether he sets foot on the American shore. Though a light-hearted drama, the film very subtly addresses the dark and grim reality of the industry of illegal migration. In addition to illegal migration, the film deals with internal migration and left-behind families of the migrants, issues that are absent from commercial cinema. As acknowledged by a United Nations Human Development Programme Report on Migrations, this combination of diverse concerns under migration is a problem. The report addresses "illegal migration as one category among several others, including economic and conflict-induced migration."<sup>28</sup> *Umrika* attempts to address the mafia that runs the trade for illegally transporting people to the West. It begins with an assumption that Rama's brother is in America; without any news from him for several months, the younger brother, Rama, decides to go to America. Due to the lack of information and proper documentation, Rama realises Patel is the only way to go to America. Patel signifies the mafia industry that operates clandestinely in the gullies of Mumbai. The likes of Patel are not shown positively; they are not messiahs helping the needy, but instead, they manipulate the gullible people. He yells, "Do I look like a bloody travel agent?"<sup>29</sup> and then demands 200000 in cash to transport one person to New York. It shows that getting into a country illegally by avoiding all the checks and documentation is tricky. Thus, this process is explored in greater detail in this film, while it is seldom dealt with in commercial migration sagas. The film ingeniously conveys Rama's sense of belongingness and responsibility towards his family and village.

The film uniquely presents its protagonist, Ramakant, who decides to go to America, not because he sees it as a promised land or desires a better life but because his entire village believes that his older brother is a successful man in the United States. "If, back home, they ever found out all this was a lie, their whole family would be shamed forever."<sup>30</sup> To ward off this shame, he decides to embark on this journey. This shame is similar to the shame of a failure that stops people from coming back from a foreign land. According to Jan Vos, migrants usually "feel they will suffer a tremendous loss of face if they return without having had success and without having paid back their debts to family and friends."<sup>31</sup> The duty is towards this community instead of the nationalistic sentiment generally portrayed in commercial films. In the film, he is given two days to pack his possessions. Leaving the country in a hurried state reflects the black market that operates behind this industry. There is the depiction of uncertainty as found via the representation

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Human Development Programme Report, *Human Development, Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (2009), p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Prashant Nair (dir.), *Umrika* (Netflix, 2015), 0:59:28-0:59:32.

<sup>30</sup> Nair, *Umrika*, 1:16:26-1:16:32.

<sup>31</sup> Jan Vos, "Illegal Migrants in the Netherlands," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1995), p. 111.



of nervousness found in the dark and dingy streets of Mumbai in the film. This uncertainty is a significant aspect of being an illegal migrant.

Further, the glimpse of other co-passengers with Rama informs us of their working-class status. People are dehumanised in their home country when stuffed in a container docked onto a sailing ship. This film thus focuses on the trials they have to go through to get a chance to reach the desired land. The fate of Ramakant and others in that container remains obscure, left to the imagination of this film's audience. The story starts in India and ends in transit. It successfully points toward lesser but grimmer realities of migration. People getting trapped into migrating illegally to foreign countries and absolute silence on the families of the immigrants are some of the themes that an independent cinema like *Umrika* addresses.

### **Illegal Migration in *Surkhaab***

*Surkhaab* (2015) tells the story of Jeet, a Judo champion forced to run to Canada to live with her brother, who she believes is already employed there. Jeet needs to escape from a powerful politician's wrath after attacking his son in self-defence. At the same time, the film shows that the financial situation of Jeet's family, even though she is an athlete, has not fared well. The viewer discovers these reasons for Jeet to take a tumultuous and dangerous journey from India to Canada via illegal means. Throughout the story, an emphasis is put on the reason for the desperate attempt at migrating. One finds that the exploitation of conditions in the home country and the same exploitation continues in the host country; the autonomy is diminished the moment the border is crossed and turns into a non-existent status. When Jeet lands in Canada, she must instantly hide, lie, and run. Her lack of awareness creates multiple situations in which she is vulnerable and in danger. Her brother is kidnapped in Canada, and she is left helpless. As seen in *Umrika*, education and lack of awareness play a role in gullible citizens placing faith in the agents and resorting to them as the only option for migrating.<sup>32</sup>

The use of fiction in film permits a dramatic take on storytelling that uses the audience's attention span to keep them interested in the film. At the same time, one finds that this space of independent cinema does not over-dramatise the real inspirations of the story to make it formulaic, as found in commercial Bollywood films. In the case of *Surkhaab*, she is not only exploited with the amount of money that is extorted from her in payment for her transportation, but her helplessness is taken advantage of by making her a pawn for a larger plot of contraband. After all the money Jeet spends to get to Canada, she is still unaware of the meagre living conditions of her brother, who earns minimum wages by working in a restaurant.<sup>33</sup> "Driven by sheer desperation and their willingness to accept any type of work, coupled with a lack of understanding of the host country's language, culture, and laws governing workers' rights, they often find employment in

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<sup>32</sup> Sanjay Talreja (dir.), *Surkhaab* (Golden Gate Creations, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> "Surkhaab: Flight of the reluctant immigrant," *Business Standard*, 18 October (2024). At: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/surkhaab-flight-of-the-reluctant-immigrant-ians-movie-review-rating-115052200548\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/surkhaab-flight-of-the-reluctant-immigrant-ians-movie-review-rating-115052200548_1.html).

what has been described as the ‘3D jobs’- those that are dirty, difficult and dangerous.”<sup>34</sup> Much like the psychological journey, the physical journey becomes arduous with the constant terror of being caught. The status of these migrants deemed ‘illegal’ is determined by the fear they constantly live in. Many instances in the film, like when Jeet discovers her brother working at the restaurant, when she has to undergo a physical journey, and when she has to run from a number of people who she believes are after her not just for the diamonds that she is carrying but also because she is an illegal migrant, become the core of this film’s grammar and create the sense of urgency. They may never be caught or deported, but there is always a fear of being caught and then deported from the country. The fear of detection drives their life. Jeet makes a Hispanic friend who becomes the community that initiates Jeet into the new land. For an illegal migrant, focusing on safety and the need to attain it becomes a driving force for the protagonist. When drawing a comparison with its depiction in commercial cinema, one finds that illegal migration is allowed to take center stage in the films of the independent genre in Indian cinema, and this space proves to be beneficial to zoom in precisely on the issue of illegal migration being the center of the protagonists’ conflicts.

## Conclusion

Indian cinema, as seen as a blanket term, converged within its stories of human conflicts. Demarcating Indian cinema into Bollywood, the commercial Hindi film industry and the most widely received and viewed industry, becomes a cultural marker of what Indian experiences comprise. For Indians and the international audience, Bollywood sells the dreams of being larger than life by producing blockbusters, which boast a song and dance sequence, dramatic storytelling, and aspirational narratives. In comparison, independent cinema does not indulge in these. One finds stories that are not necessarily about wins and aspirations but of faulty human beings and unequal social systems. Fiction narratives of independent cinema allow stylisation and aestheticisation of these struggles. Indian cinema thus provides the audience with options for viewership. However, the forms that comprise these choices are not bereft of their politics.

Migration has been envisioned in detail in Bollywood as well as independent cinema. While Bollywood essentially works around the valorisation of the nation when addressing its diaspora, specifically in the West, it also limits the scope of telling microscopic stories about issues within this diaspora. As discussed in this article, it entails the dramatic storytelling of homogenised migrant experience, creating stereotypes. As can be seen in the above discussion, films coming from the legacy of commercial Bollywood end up focusing on universal aspects of love, relationships, aspirations, and individual passions. However, the nuances of being an illegal migrant unable to return home are sidelined. This marginalised section is taken up instead by independent cinema, which provides the space and the audience that focus solely on the experience of being an illegal migrant.

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<sup>34</sup> Joyce Yukawa, *Migration from the Philippines 1975-1995: An Annotated Bibliography* (Manila: Scalabrini Migration Centre, 1996), p. 27.

Illegal migration as a social and individual issue has been addressed in many other films made through the regional cinema of India. Punjabi films, mainly due to the sufficient history of the region in the context of illegal migration, have produced several family films in the genre of formulaic comedies. Regional cinema becomes a fertile ground to investigate the treatment of illegal migration in Indian Cinema. This article is limited in its scope of research about the narratives of migration during partition. We looked explicitly at the portrayals of migrations from India to the West; however, crossing borders from its neighboring countries is outside the purview of this study. The trajectory of domestic migration, specifically after the pandemic and its representations, can also be seen as grounds for further research.

Even though today, Bollywood and independent cinema have largely converged within the norms and boundaries of Indian cinema, one finds that this condition of being an illegal migrant enjoys a much-privileged space in independent cinema. Today, funding and marketing of films have somewhat blurred in the realm of what can be considered commercial and independent. In that context, this article studied the formula of commercial films, which is found to be getting in the way of marginalised stories being filmed and reaching mass audiences.